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In Memoriam

Carl Schuster, Ph.D (1904-1969)

Carl Schuster was internationally known as a scholar in the fields of Folklore and Symbolism, but he was especially interested in symbols on textiles, which he collected all over the world on his many journeys. His interests were very broad, covering several branches of Anthropology and Ethnology, as well as Cultural History in general. Because he travelled so widely, he was well-known to scholars, museum curators, and congress-goers on five continents.

He also served as an important link in international scholarship, not only through personal contacts during his research trips, but also because, from his home-base in Woodstock, N.Y., he conducted a kind of free information bureau for the exchange of questions and ideas among scholars and specialists in different fields, between whom he was the only direct link.

There, in Woodstock, he had very extensive files of notes and films, just the ordering of which was in itself a marvel of efficient organization. When he could not answer a question from his own vast knowledge, or from his files, he would introduce the inquirer, by letter, to some specialist, thus widening the chain of international communication among scholars in many fields. He did all this on a completely voluntary basis, though it took a great deal of his own valuable time, because he was very dedicated to the ideal of sharing knowledge as broadly as possible. Unfortunately, his death snapped this important link. In accordance with his will, his enormous files of research notes and photographic records went to a museum in Switzerland, but apparently they are not being used to continue his international exchange of ideas.

Carl was a pioneer in his favorite field, which might be called the Study of Folk Symbols—though even this sounds too limiting, in view of his extremely broad interests. In the course of his earlier researches, after graduating from Harvard and getting his Master's degree there (B.A., 1927, M.A., 1930), he spent three years in China (1931-'33), living in Peking, and studying with Baron von Stael-Holstein, a Baltic refugee and a scholar of the highest distinction. At this time, he also undertook his first collecting trips in West and Southwest China, penetrating into remote areas where foreign travellers were seldom, if ever, seen. His gift for languages enabled him to adjust quickly to changes in dialects—his Chinese was always very good—and his easy-going friendly manner gained the confidence of country people who might otherwise have been suspicious or hostile on meeting a foreign stranger. Thus his collecting trips were very productive. Some of his rare Chinese folk embroideries were purchased by George Hewitt Myers for the Textile Museum, and another large group of his folk materials—not limited to textiles—is now in the Field Museum, in Chicago. In addition to his wanderings in backcountry China, he also travelled far off the beaten track in many other parts of Asia, notably Indo-China and Indonesia, and he made several trips out into the Pacific Islands.

From Peking, he went to Europe, where he earned his doctorate at the University of Vienna, under Josef Strzygowski, in 1934. For a short time he served as Assistant Curator of Chinese Art in the Philadelphia Art Museum. But he preferred active research to curatorial work, so he returned to Peking for three more years (1935-38). I was living in China during that same period, but in a different part of the country, and we only met toward the end of our respective stays, when our rather different research projects brought us both to Chengtu, soon after the outbreak of the Japanese War. We did not meet very often in the succeeding years, but we wrote each other constantly, to share our research findings, and he taught me very much.

For twenty years, following World War II, he lived at Woodstock—though leaving frequently on research trips—devoting himself to studies of symbols, and writing many articles. He was aided during this period by various grants: from the Harvard-Yenching Institute, the Bollingen Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation (which gave him several), and the Guggenheim Foundation (from which he received at least two). A great deal of this time was devoted to work on a monumental manuscript, "The Sunbird". Several times it seemed on the verge of completion, and the Harvard University Press even made a set of color plates to illustrate it. However, he was a perfectionist and could not permit himself to publish it until the last bits of information had come to his hand. Of course that was impossible. The subject was too vast, and there was always more to be learned. He began to be diverted into other lines of research, investigating *hocker* figures, labyrinths, and tattoo motifs, etc., writing brilliant monographs on these and discussing them in papers for various international congresses.

Although his personal interests really lay in the meanings behind symbols, from which he drew much personal inspiration, in his lectures and scholarly publications he devoted more attention to demonstrating the wide distribution of certain popular symbols, and the interrelationship of various art media, showing how these linked together peoples and cultures, and had done so from the earliest times. He believed in keeping his findings on a "high scientific plane," avoiding discussions of the meanings which interested him so deeply, feeling that it was almost impossible to explain these except to others whose thoughts ran in the same channels. Perhaps his greatest contribution was to follow Dr. Coomaraswamy, whom he greatly admired, in demonstrating that folk symbols constitute a definite form of language, communicating the thoughts of "primitive" peoples of the present, as well as those of their ancestors.

But Carl was no mere follower; he was a pioneer in the realms of the mind. He constantly developed original ideas and experimented with linking various fields of scholarship in new and imaginative ways, always being careful to check his thoughts and his findings with the most rigorous scholarship before he shared them with others. Night after night he would be the last reader in the New York Public

Library, as he checked the data on some new ideas. His tireless investigation into new fields of knowledge in many areas enabled him to see interconnections between vastly different fields of scholarship and between widely separated cultures of the Old World and the New. In this respect, he resembled his great friend of Vienna days, Baron Heine-Geldern, with whom he kept up a lifelong correspondence on matters of mutual interest, including the idea of Transpacific contacts in early times.

When Carl reported his findings in very thorough articles or in profusely illustrated reports at the congresses, he often evoked opposition from specialists in particular fields, who were annoyed to see their areas of research opened up —or linked to others—by chains of facts and ideas that they themselves had failed to discover. But, in time, many of these opponents came to see the validity of his thinking, and they profited from his suggestions to learn more themselves.

Although he had a wide knowledge of World Art, at every level, he often told me that only the folk arts really interested him. The Palace Art, he said, was so sophisticated, so swayed by passing fashions, that it blurred or distorted the real meanings of the symbols as it altered them in efforts to create change, or more decorative effects, for princes and courtiers with jaded tastes; while the arts in the service of the Great World Religions, he thought, too often tended to twist old meanings—or to limit them—in order to convey their own propaganda. Thus, he might not have been greatly interested in the Safavid carpets that form the core of my study presented here in his memory. But I like to think he would have enjoyed the methodology I used, because I learned it from him. He, along with Benjamin Rowland, Jr., and Dr. Coomaraswamy, taught me to read the language of symbols, and to look for cross-relations between the arts. He passed on much knowledge, and greatly encouraged me in this kind of research, in the course of his frequent letters. He was very generous to me —as to others—with his advice and suggestions, and shared his ideas freely, until one day in the winter of 1969 he sent a note saying that he would have to give up all his research, as it had just been discovered that he had incurable cancer. Four months later he was dead.

Carl Schuster was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on November 9th, 1904, and he died at Woodstock, N.Y., on July 3rd, 1969.

SCHUYLER CAMMANN

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1. "Some Peasant Embroideries from Western China," *Embroidery* Magazine, London, September 1935, pp. 88-89.
2. "An Archaic Form of Chess Game in Chinese Peasant Embroidery," *Man*, Vol. 36, London, September 1936, pp. 148-151.
3. "A Prehistoric Symbol in Modern Chinese Folk Art," *Man*, Vol. 36, December 1936, pp. 201-203.
4. "Das Vogelmotiv in der chinesischen Bauernstickerei" (part of his Ph.D. thesis) in J. Strzygowski, *Spuren Indogermanischen Glaubens in der bildenden Kunst*, Heidelberg, 1936, pp. 326-344.

4a. "A Bird Motive in Chinese Peasant Embroidery," translation of the above, 13 pp., Peking, 1936.

5. "Peasant Embroideries of China," *Asia* Magazine, New York, January 1937, pp. 26-31.
6. "A Comparison of Aboriginal Textile Designs in Southwest China with Peasant Designs from Eastern Europe," *Man*, Vol. 37, July 1937, pp. 105-106.
7. "A Comparative Study of Motives in Western China Folk Embroideries," *Monumenta Serica*, Vol. II, fasc. 1, Peking, 1937.
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Instituut voor de Tropen, Mededeling, XCIV, Amsterdam, 1951, pp. 3-51, with a long bibliography.
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35. "V-Shaped Chest-Markings Reconsidered: A Palaeolithic Figurine as Explanation for their Wide Modern Distribution," *Anthropos*, Vol. 63/64, Fribourg, Switzerland, 1968/69, pp. 428-440.
36. Relations of a Chinese Embroidery Design: Eastern Europe and Western Asia, Southeast Asia (the Dongson Culture) and Melanesia," in *Early Chinese Art and its Possible Influence in the Pacific Basin*, edited by Noel Barnard and Douglas Fraser, Vol. II, New York, 1972, pp. 243-290.

Schuyler van Rensselaer Cammann, by birth a New Yorker, now lives in Philadelphia, where he is professor of East Asian Studies in the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School. As a teacher at Yale-in-China, and later as an officer in the U.S.N.R., he spent more than four years in China, traveling in seventeen of the eighteen traditional provinces and twice visiting Inner Mongolia. After China was closed to foreigners, he made a series of trips to the Near East and to India, making many journeys through Turkey and Iran and working as an archaeologist in Turkey and Afghanistan. As a result, he now teaches about Islamic Art and Architecture, as well as giving courses involving the Far East and Central Asia. He has written four books and many articles for international magazines and journals and has also done articles for *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and other reference works.

The author has requested for this special memorial issue to Carl Schuster that his article be published intact without editions of any sort.
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